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THE "MISSION" OF WOMAN

BY A. MAURICE LOW

"LET woman remain in her proper sphere!" There is no way so easy to dispose of an inconvenient, disputative antagonist than with an ambiguous phrase. It is the more subtle method of the Old Bailey lawyer—when your own case is weak, bully the witnesses on the other side and abuse your opponent. Ask why suffrage should not be granted to women, and the answer will be, "Let woman remain in her proper sphere." What is her sphere? You probe in perplexity, and the crushing retort will be—delivered in a tone to imply that you must be either fool or knave, and preferably both—"Woman's sphere is the home and family. A woman fulfils her highest mission when she is wife and mother." Further argument is closed.

The unfortunate predicament of the opponent of suffrage to woman is that he (and, with a delicacy that every woman who opposes suffrage to her sex will appreciate, the masculine pronoun is used to include the feminine) is illogical, and that illogicalness is the result of ignorance deep-rooted in tradition. To the ignorant everything that is new is dangerous. The demand of woman is new, consequently it is dangerous. The proposition is as simple as a syllogism, and almost as fallacious.

There are two, and only two, relations that woman can occupy to man. One is to be his wife and the mother of his children. The better she keeps her house and the more young she produces, the more nearly she approaches to having fulfilled her "mission." That to some people will seem like stating the proposition broadly and brutally. I am not at all hesitant about shocking the nice sensibilities of those tender souls who wear aigrettes and shudder at the thought of a live lobster turning pink in a pot of boiling water. Ugliness is not made beautiful by wrapping

it in pretty words, and there have been too many euphemisms in discussing suffrage. Besides, the case will prove itself by logic, and logic is truth, and truth does not hide in polished phrases.

If woman's real mission is to be a man's wife and the mother of his children, then woman was in her ideal state when the world was young and men and women lived in savagery. For in that era of few clothes and primitive desires woman performed her duties most admirably. Not having many household duties, she had much time for child-bearing and child-rearing. In the intervals between child-bearing and child-rearing she was an excellent beast of burden, docile, intelligent within her limited capacity, yielding ready obedience to her master. She became a necessity. She was a convenience that her husband appreciated, who valued her almost as highly as his bow and arrows, his spear, his canoe, or his flint hatchet; and who ranked her perhaps not first among his possessions—for a new wife was easier to get and less costly than one of Tubal Cain's latest model guaranteed hand-hammered hunting-spears—but as an asset not to be wantonly wasted.

The savage had a great advantage over civilized man. He had no artificial conventions and no scruples. He was as cold-blooded as a farmer. When the woman became old and pottered about her work, or could no longer bear children, he found another wife.

It was an ideal state, but it could not last; no ideal state ever does. When man dug himself out of his cave and transformed himself from a naked savage into a skin-clothed animal and cooked his food instead of tearing it to pieces with his hands and made cunning take the place of brute strength, he wanted a wife with at least a glimmer of his intelligence. She was still housekeeper and mother—for that in the conception of primitive man nature had designed her—but he could no longer tolerate an animate machine mentally little above his beasts. When he beat her because she couldn't count up to three—which was the limit of her lord's arithmetical knowledge—that day began woman's emancipation.

That's the mistake he made. It was the same mistake that has been made since. You can't put brains into a race or a people with a proclamation. A thousand years of barbarism are not wiped out with a few high-sounding phrases.

Something more than good intentions are required to make civilization. So long as the savage was content with his wife's "mission" all went well in a select cave-dwelling society; it was when he put foolish notions in her head and taught her the intricacies of addition that he dug a pit for his destruction.

It has been said there are only two relations woman can occupy to man. One we have seen—that of housekeeper and the mother of his children. The other is that of his intellectual equal. Between those two—the poles of the social relation—is space formless and void where there is no place for the feet of women to rest. There is no middle ground. Man either wants woman for one purpose, and in that case he cares nothing about her intellect, or he wants her for many purposes, and in that case he always considers her intellect.

Let us not quibble about words. "Intellect" sounds portentous and has a different meaning according to the yard-stick by which it is measured. The great scientist's standard of intellect is very different from that of the young fellow from whom one buys his cigars and who deferentially asks whether you think the Green Socks will "swat"—I believe I am technically correct in the use of that term—the Yellow Jackets and to whom for the sake of politeness one has to make a Delphic reply; yet it is only a difference of degree, not of substance. The woman who is to be the scientist's wife must be in sympathy with his work; the young fellow's "girl" shares with him his keen interest in the "swatting" of the Yellow Jackets; in fact, just as it was the woman's fine understanding of science that first attracted the scientist to her, so it was the girl's professional appreciation of "three baggers" and "pop flies" that made the tobacconist's assistant recognize in her a kindred soul. The woman whose sole interest in life is horses or baseball would be regarded by the scientist as his intellectual inferior; the girl to whom baseball made no appeal would invite the contempt of our young cigar-selling friend.

The intimate relation between man and woman makes it impossible that man can morally or intellectually advance and woman stand still or retrograde. If such a thing were possible it would result in the deterioration of man. But the hypothesis suggested is a biological paradox, and the

animal as well as the vegetable kingdoms prove its impossibility. The male and female of all species must keep step. That does not mean that the male develops no qualities peculiar to himself, or that the female loses her distinguishing traits. But when man walked erect woman ceased to crawl.

Man brought woman to his own level. He could not help it. He could no more live with a woman his intellectual inferior than he could live with a woman who was incapable of understanding the language in which he expressed his wants. That relationship might suffice temporarily, but it could not be lasting. For man and woman to hold spiritual communion when the physical attraction ceased or became dulled an exchange of intellectual ideas was imperative.

Again we see there is no middle ground for woman. She is either the mother of children or man's companion.

Stripped of all humbug, what the average man desires in a wife is to make her the mother of his children and still have the enjoyment that comes from her companionship. Put in its naked form to the average man, who is not merely a brute, and it is safe to say that nine men out of ten would, if compelled to elect, willingly sacrifice parenthood for the sake of companionship.

The revolt of woman is the revolt against that degradation that would condemn them to a single function—motherhood. They have reached that stage in their intellectual evolution when they no longer regard maternity as the *ultima thule*. There is no revolt against sex—for the instinct of sex is too powerful to be suppressed; but there is a passionate demand that woman be recognized as man's equal.

That demand—the demand for equality—has been perverted, deliberately and through ignorance. It does not mean that woman claims to be man's physical or intellectual equal; what it does mean is that woman asks to be considered as man's equal within her own limitations and not to be looked upon as his inferior based solely upon the fact of sex. A flat-chested, anemic youth is not the physical equal of a man who strokes a 'varsity eight, but he is officially recognized as the superior of all women. Man, no matter what his moral, intellectual, or physical status, is legally and politically the superior of woman. A married man who has bought stocks with his wife's money can sell

them without her consent; a married woman who has bought stocks out of her own earnings cannot transfer them without her husband's signature.

Personally I care very little whether women are given a vote. That seems the smallest and least significant part of a movement that has enmeshed women in its mazes and the real meaning of which they understand as little as men. Instead of enlarging the franchise one would prefer to see it reduced; a very stiff educational qualification *plus* equally rigid moral qualifications would have salutary results. The ballot in the hands of the illiterate is as great a menace as in the hands of the dishonest or the drunkard. In England bankruptcy is a social crime. Is not moral bankruptcy an even greater crime against the State?

'The ballot, most people believe, is the end for which women are striving. It is, in a way, for mankind must always have a definite aim just as men in battle must have a war-cry or a flag around which to rally. But the ballot is not the end, it is simply the means. The ballot works no magic. The demand for the ballot is only incidental to breaking down the artificial relation that exists between the sexes, which has been as detrimental to man as it has been to woman. The age-long tradition of woman's inferiority will be swept away, to the benefit of man no less than to woman, when equal political rights are conferred on women. One-half of the world from the day of birth to the day of death—the female half—is labeled inferior, and from that stigma of inferiority there is no escape; the other half swaggers around pluming itself on its boasted superiority, puffed up, arrogant, conceited, complaining of the stupidity of woman, at times treating her as a child and at other times irritated because she is as foolish as a child. And woman has meekly submitted. With fatalistic resignation she has accepted her place, often hiding her intelligence in flattery to the assumed cleverness of the man. "There is perpetually the inducement to act the hypocrite before the hypocrite world unless a woman submits to be the humbly knitting housewife, unquestionably worshipful of her lord." The world prefers decorum to honesty," Meredith's Diana philosophizes. 'It is an absurd and ridiculous relation. It is this relation that has compelled woman, from the dawn of creation, to use her guile and wiles first to ensnare man and then to hold him. She has been chattel,

toy, or luxury. For this false and demoralizing relation—no less demoralizing to man than to woman—she would now substitute intellectual and rational equality.

It has been alleged that the readjustment of society on a proper basis of the relation between man and woman would lead to social confusion, chief of which would be a refusal of woman to enter into the married state; and a falling-off of the birth rate would of course be the result. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but it tickles the ears of the groundling. The fear that marriage would fall into desuetude has no terrors for the biologist, the sociologist, or the philosopher—that is, not so long as men and women remain what they are to-day. No law of man, no convention of society, no teaching or preaching—nothing, in short, that is artificial will exercise the slightest influence against a fundamental law of nature and nature has ordained that man and woman shall marry.

That there may be a decrease in the birth rate as the result of woman's intellectual emancipation is not at all improbable, nor would that be the greatest evil to befall the world. It is, of course, the fashion to-day to gauge everything by quantity and to be indifferent to quality, yet the future of the race and the present happiness of a people rest on certain qualities rather than mere numbers. Would an irremediable evil be done if the world, like a tired field, were allowed to lie fallow for a season or two? I think not. When sham civilization has been succeeded by scientific, parents who bring malformed children into the world, or those with the seeds of disease in their puny bodies, will be held in contempt, and the death of a child in infancy will be regarded, not as a visitation of God, but as a defiance of the laws of nature and heredity. It is probable that the birth rate will fall because women will contract marriage later and more rationally. Marriage then will no longer be a woman's "mission" any more than it is to-day man's "mission," so that women will be enabled to enjoy the same power of selection as men do, and they will be governed by their intellect in making a decision. The result may be fewer children, but they will be happier, more virile, and more intellectual children, and there will be fewer heartaches. There will be fewer mothers to mourn a memory; fewer fathers to know the agony of having given life only to see it taken away.

It is impossible to deny the fact—and it is the pitiless logic of fact, no matter how unwelcome or distasteful it may be—that woman must either be a child-bearing, house-keeping inferior or man's equal. Any other relation is not only illogical, but impossible, and reacts both on man and woman. So long as man is content with woman's inferiority and woman accepts the position to which man has assigned her the relation is simple; the moment he demands of her something more—and continually he is raising the standard—the old relation has broken down. She is forced then, we are told, to sacrifice motherhood for intellect. But is it a sacrifice? Is not the character of a race determined by the intellectuality of the mother? Is not the higher level of civilization, in a large measure at least, the result of the partial emancipation of woman and the modification of the old relation between the sexes? It is impossible to close one's eyes to what nature has made so plain and society has so clearly proved. If in the economy of nature women were created for one purpose—just as the male bee dies in the performance of the only duty for which nature permits his existence—physically and mentally women would be differently constituted; nature, stupid and wasteful, but never meaningless, would not have hidden her meaning in obscurity, but made it the most palpable fact of sex; instead of which it appears not as the justification for woman's creation, but as an incident in her life, which destroys her neither physically nor mentally. No matter how often the question is argued or what phase the argument assumes, it always resolves itself into this: If woman is put into the world solely to be a mother, the more nearly she reaches physical perfection and the less she has of intellectual cultivation the more nearly she approaches the ideal; the moment you admit that she was created not solely for motherhood her intellect and her personal freedom are as important as her physical well-being. In a word, is she simply a magnificent animal? What decent man wants to regard woman as merely a magnificent animal?

Equality will not destroy woman's capacity for child-bearing nor prevent her performing her part as a mother; it will, however, make her a better and more intelligent wife and mother. She will lose nothing by having lost the sense of inferiority; she will have gained much by feeling that she has it in herself to prove her equality—her superiority,

even—if she has the power. It will not turn the world topsyturvy. It will not make man the weaker sex. It will place man and woman on a level, which will be to the advantage of society.

One is always reluctant to indulge in the *tu quoque* because it suggests too much the gamin's withering rejoinder, at a safe distance, to a more powerful antagonist: "All those things you say I is you am double," but the temptation is too great to resist, especially as the anti-suffragist does not reason, but makes dogmatic statements, mostly ridiculous. "Would a vote have doubled the strength of Charlotte Corday's slender arm?" asks an anti-suffragist, as if to imply the last word has been said. "Did a vote increase the strength of Guiteau's pistol finger?" one may ask with equal fatuity, as if one could prove a cause from a single incident or determine the taste of a loaf of bread from an unripened ear of wheat! "Would Jeanne d'Arc have done more for her country if she had been a voter?" "Would Grant have been a greater general if he had been a fire-worshiper?" If the writer would prove, or at least attempt to prove, that Jeanne d'Arc was able to do more for her country because she was *not* a voter—fantastic as the process of reasoning might be—the argument would be entitled to some respect instead of being made childish.

A well-known writer of fiction who has entered the lists to do battle against her sisters bases her objection to woman suffrage on physical weakness. "A dozen ruffians," she says, "could prevent a hundred women from depositing a single ballot." Unanswerable! But could not a dozen ruffians prevent a hundred Charles W. Eliots from depositing their ballots? Have not two or three ruffians frequently prevented dozens of decent citizens from going to the polls? If a dozen ruffians can nullify the votes of a hundred women or a hundred men of genius, a dozen ruffians are the more potent force in the affairs of State. Is not that the corollary of our champion's proposition? Again, the same writer opposes the suffrage to women because "no women can have any practical knowledge of shipping and navigation, of the work of trainmen on railways, of mining, or of many other subjects of the highest importance. Their legislation, therefore, would not probably be intelligent." Despite this sweeping assertion, it is nevertheless a fact that woman has done and can do everything that man has done or is

doing. Women have fought with desperate ferocity on the field of battle; they have ruled kingdoms and made laws; they have led armies and navigated ships; they have endured the rigors of arctic winters and toiled under tropical skies; they have cured the sick and buried the dead; they have painted pictures and written books; they have enriched science and made discoveries; they have even worked in mines. Yet man, with all his boasted superiority of intellect, the wisest of all men, the wisdom of all men from the time of Adam if concentrated in one man, is powerless to do what woman does as a matter of course. No man can bear a child. No man can suckle a child. Yet man, without "any practical knowledge" of child-bearing, makes laws for child-bearing women; "their legislation, therefore, would not probably be intelligent." It is always dangerous for a disputant to attempt to prove too much. The opponent of woman suffrage has furnished an answerable reason why the right of suffrage should be granted—even if the right of women to participate in legislation should be limited to subjects of which women alone can have "practical knowledge" and man can have none.

There is another supposed reason why woman is to be regarded as the inferior of man, and again a sweeping generalization is employed without any scientific basis on which to ground it. "A woman cannot stand physical effort and nervous strain as a man can," which is an attempt to prove too much with too little material. Some women can stand more physical effort and nervous strain than some men, some women less, but that is of minor consequence. The failure of one woman to lift twenty pounds which one man can lift with little effort does not prove the mental, moral, or intellectual inferiority of that woman as compared with that man or make her any the less valuable as a counselor when brains, and not brawn, are the qualities to be drawn upon. If the argument is sound—the magnification of the physical—our whole system of education is at fault, our military methods are ridiculous, and we now know why the Church exerts so little authority. For the learned professor of Greek cannot endure "the physical effort and nervous strain" of the youngster who plays tackle on the 'varsity football team, who reinforces his "physical effort" by joy rides at sixty miles an hour and playfully punches the head of a protesting policeman; the

recruit called up from the plow has a much larger stock of "physical effort" than the tactician of sixty; the bishop must yield to the sexton in "physical effort." Alice and the Mad Hatter never conceived anything more fantastic than do the opponents of woman suffrage who plant themselves on the physical.

Again, another argument is used, as is said by the writer who has already been quoted: "Nine hundred and ninety-nine women go into work with a fixed intention of abandoning it at the first possible moment. A woman at the period of her greatest energy is liable at any moment to make a contract of marriage, which vitiates all other contracts; and women are less amenable to discipline than men."

It is true that most women look forward to marriage because an unmarried woman is outside of her sex. Society has stupidly and cruelly made spinsterhood a disgrace; the "old maid" is an abnormality that society feels licensed to treat with contempt half veiled with pity; she has violated the ordinance of both God and man. A man may remain a bachelor, and no one thinks any the less of him. Economic and conventional requirements force marriage on woman.

That women are less amenable to discipline than men is the consequence of man's treatment of woman, who has from the dawn of creation regarded her either as chattel, toy, or inferior and encouraged her to believe that she was subject of her own special code and was not required to submit herself to discipline. Told that she was created so that she might become a man's wife, exhorted by the Church to enter into matrimony, put by legislation in a class by herself so long as she remained unmarried, very often lumped by the law with idiots and children, it is not surprising that her sense of responsibility was weakened, and with it, as a natural result, she became undisciplined. Yet, despite a training that would have been equally injurious to man, women have proved that they are amenable to discipline. Women in factories and shops obey the rules and regulations made by legislative or private authority; on the great ocean liners one notices little difference between the discipline of the stewardesses and that of the stewards, and when both have been subjected to the highest test, an accident or a panic, the women as a class have shown the effect of discipline no less than the men. The

perfect discipline displayed by youths at boarding-school or young men at college no woman, of course, can expect to match. There, at least, it must be acknowledged, man shines superior.

One might go on indefinitely answering the objections raised by the opponents of woman's enfranchisement. Political differences, we are told by one champion of man, "between brothers, for example, who vote on differing sides do not promote harmony. How much more inharmonious must be the political differences between a husband and wife, each of whom has a vote which may be used as a weapon against the other?" Religion unfortunately has always been a much more bitter subject of controversy than politics, yet many estimable husbands and wives are members of different churches, and they continue to dwell in harmony. If it should be said that when a girl marries she will naturally be of her husband's political faith, but later might go over into the opposite party, the same thing can be said about religious conversion. Protestant girls married to Protestant husbands have become Catholics after marriage. Sometimes this change of faith leads to domestic differences, at other times it results in the husband's conversion; and it would be the same in politics. The marriage certificate does not include a policy of insurance against domestic discord. Men and women must take their chances, and if they go to wreck on politics the probabilities are that, even without politics, religion or bridge or Ibsen would have swamped them.

Battle as we may against progress, we cannot prevent it. Delay it we may, but in the end progress will triumph. Progress demands that woman be regarded, not as man's toy or chattel or inferior or simply the female of the race, but as his equal and companion in the largest and truest sense. That companionship will come only when the tradition of inferiority is broken down and men and women meet on common ground despite the accident of sex.

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